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Reagan: no plot in Nicaragua

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President Reagan broke the official silence on the U.S. role in Nicaragua's guerrilla war and flatly stated Thursday the United States is not attempting to topple the leftist Sandinist regime.

"We are not doing anything to try to overthrow the Nicaraguan government," Reagan told a hastily called news conference. "Anything we are doing is aimed at interdicting supply lines and stopping efforts to overthrow the government of El Salvador."

It was the strongest administration statement yet on the issue — and came as congressional committees edged toward a confrontation with the White House over the U.S. role in Central America.

Reagan spoke just hours after the State Department charged that congressional restrictions on aid and other aspects of U.S. policy could help the Sandinistas.

The State Department lashed out at a House subcommittee for prohibiting covert support for Nicaraguan anti-government guerrillas and rejecting emergency military aid for El Salvador. "Decisions of this type destroy the capacity and continuity of our efforts," said spokesman John Hughes.

Hughes called the Salvadoran aid restriction "rigid, complex and highly ambitious" and

the action on Nicaragua "a signal to the Sandinistas that they could act with impunity regardless of how egregious their actions might become."

Reagan said he was abiding by a 1982 amendment to the defense appropriations bill forbidding USA assistance "for the purpose" of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government or provoking a military confrontation between Nicaragua and Honduras.

Earlier, White House Counselor Edwin Meese called the amendment "unnecessary and undesirable" interference with Reagan's right to conduct foreign policy.

Reflecting the administration's deep irritation over congressional efforts to probe covert action in Central America, Meese said the administration has "an absolute moral right to do what we are doing" — and asked that foreign policy be left to Reagan.

In related developments:

■ In San Salvador, air force officers planned a possible mutiny against El Salvador's controversial defense minister Jose Guillermo Garcia to force him to resign by today, but said they would not stop fighting guerrillas.

■ Eden Pastora, the Nicaraguan revolutionary hero who defected after helping put the Sandinistas in power, was reported Thursday to be back in his homeland leading a rebel force against the Sandinist government.